

The 'Pro-Contra Propaganda Machine': 'Conjectures, Innuendos and Distortions'

The Washington Post A-17
The New York Times _____
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The Wall Street Journal _____
The Christian Science Monitor _____
New York Daily News _____
USA Today _____
The Chicago Tribune _____

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The article by Robert Parry and Peter Kornbluh entitled "Reagan's Pro-Contra Propaganda Machine" [Outlook, Sept. 4] is based on conjectures, innuendos and distortions, with a smattering of facts, woven together in a conspiracy theory that may make good fiction but it is not responsible journalism.

The central thesis of the article is that the late CIA director William Casey orchestrated the creation of a domestic covert propaganda mechanism based at the National Security Council to get around legal restrictions, and I was the key. This is not true. Let me provide the facts, all of which I have testified to under oath to the joint congressional investigating committee:

■ The Reagan administration sought to strengthen the ability of the U.S. government to communicate openly and more effectively its foreign policy views to foreign and domestic audiences. The centralized public diplomacy structure is a matter of public record and was designed to accomplish this task. This is a legitimate and constructive role of government which has been exercised by other presidents and which any administration should practice.

■ Although one would not know it from reading Parry and Kornbluh, public diplomacy during the following years was focused on a broad range of subjects, from arms reduction to Afghanistan. Last December, Secretary George Shultz credited the successful placement of INF missiles in Europe, which led to the first reduction in American and Soviet arms, in part to America's public diplomacy campaign. This is not without precedent. I would remind the reader of President Jimmy Carter's efforts concerning the Panama Canal Treaty. Public information efforts were especially important in the complex and often confusing Central American situation. The Sandinistas sought to influence this debate directly by flooding the world media markets with propaganda. The U.S. government was entitled to be heard. The administration produced solid factual information to domestic and foreign audiences so that Central American issues could be understood and the policy debate could be conducted on a level playing field.

■ Individuals assigned to the NSC are not "moles" from other departments. Each person reports exclusively to the NSC and directly serves the president. The Parry/Kornbluh charge impugns the integrity of many fine individuals who have served the NSC over the years, and in my case it is totally in error.

Shortly after joining the NSC in July 1982, I cut all ties with the CIA. At no time during my five years with the NSC did I receive any instructions or orders from CIA Director Casey or any other CIA official. My efforts were to strengthen our country's ability to communicate openly and effectively around the world. To suggest that I was being used by Casey or the CIA is wrong on all counts.

■ Ambassador Otto Reich was selected not by me, although I have a high regard for his professional competence. He was picked by National Security Adviser William Clark, after having been initially recommended by Sen. Richard Stone, the first director of the Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean. This office was part of the Department of State, which, in turn, reported periodically to the NSC, as it does on many issues.

■ Lt. Col. Oliver North was a very energetic fellow, but to suggest he served as a chief operational officer for me is sheer fantasy. The only purpose to be served by tying North's activities to public diplomacy efforts would be to tarnish the administration's public diplomacy structure.

Parry and Kornbluh base much of their story on conclusions that had been presented to the Iran-contra congressional committee by one staffer, but rejected by the committee. The public is being asked to believe that a Republican minority was successful in suppressing this information. That makes no sense. The committee showed its professionalism by rejecting the thesis not on procedural grounds but because it lacked credibility and substantiation. One is drawn to the inevitable judgment that at least "one unnamed congressional investigator" unable to convince the committee of this conspiracy theory has decided to persist regardless of due process or simple fairness.

"Reagan's Pro-Contra Propaganda Machine" should appeal to conspiracy theorists who choose to accept innuendo, half-truths and outright falsehoods to buttress accusations of illegal U.S. governmental activities. The facts, however, do not support the unfounded charges leveled by the authors.

The article claims that the Office of Public Diplomacy "was housed at the State Department but actually reported to the NSC" and then reports that "Reich and [Walter] Raymond have since denied that the office 'reported' to the NSC." What we *have* denied—repeatedly and under oath—is that the office was controlled by NSC staff. As an interagency office, the Office of Public Diplomacy reported periodically to the NSC. But it was part of the Department of State, and I, as head of it, received daily guidance from the Department of State only.

So many of the article's accusations are based on twisted facts and half-truths that it is easy for a reader not completely familiar with the whole story to be shocked at its unsupported conclusion: that the U.S. government set up a CIA-run, covert domestic propaganda effort. In fact, one of the authors has made a cottage industry of this story, obscuring one important consideration: the U.S. government has a responsibility to keep the public informed about its policy objectives in Central America. The Office of Public Diplomacy met its duty to inform the press and public honestly, openly and as completely as possible given the difficulties involved in dealing with frequently sensitive information. If the authors, neither of whom bothered to contact me, can offer proof—and not mere accusations—that this is not the case, then they should share it with the appropriate congressional committees and the administration.

—Walter Raymond Jr.

The writer was special assistant to the president for national security affairs at the NSC from 1982 to 1987.